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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a brief survey of current theory concerning reading comprehension and suggests that the role of the reader's knowledge has been largely neglected. Factors that influence the assessment of information or idea gain are the nature of the learner, the nature of the material, the nature of the purposes for reading, and the means used for measurement. Six implications for instruction are illuminated, spanning such topics as integration of learning experiences in various situations, the level of familiarity of reading materials, and the type of questioning used in evaluation of reading comprehension. (KS)

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COMPREHENSION: AN ELUSIVE CONCEPT

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Prior to 1908 little attention was paid to reading comprehension; emphasis was placed on accuracy of oral presentation and elocution. Experimentation concerned with meaning focused on the isolated word. Huey (1908), in his germinal work on reading research and instruction, reported experiments with isolated words but indicated a dissatisfaction with such measurements. He consciously "lifted" the concept of meaning beyond the word level.

> When a single word is presented, therefore, it suggests but a part or an aspect of this total meaning and is felt as inadequate and artificial unless given in its sentence context. With meanings, as with vocal utterance, the sentence meaning is the natural unit, and smaller divisions considered apart from this are felt as disjecta membra (p. 167).

By 1916, Judd as cited by Cleland (1968) was referring to comprehension of continuous discourse as the "quality of reading." In 1917, Gray as cited by Cleland (1968), spoke of reading comprehension as "the obtaining of meaning through reading." Also in 1917, Thorndike (1971) spoke of reading as "...a very elaborate procedure, involving a weighing of each of many elements in a sentence, their organization in the proper relations one to another, the selection of certain of their connotations and the rejection of others, and the cooperation of many forces to determine final response (p. 425).

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Although a number of definitions of reading comprehension were generated between 1917 and 1955, the term remained nevertheless. Yoakam as cited by Cleland (1968) included most of the ingredients as well as the doubts from the varied definitions when he stated:

> "The term comprehension, which is used to represent the general comprehension of meaning in reading, has never been completely described. ...It seems likely that comprehension is a complex which involved the mental process of recognition, or association of meaning, evaluation of suggested meaning, selection of the correct meaning, and generalization based on the meanings of details involved in a context. Some writers would add the anticipation of meaning to his complex" (p. 18).

Gray (1960) summarized his notion of comprehension as "...the attainment of competence in understanding what is read requires steady growth in ability to read the lines, to read between the lines and to read beyond the lines." Cleland (1968) suggested that comprehension is a "...complex process of bringing meaning to the printed page so that the reader can establish rapport with the author." (p. 16). Smith (1971) said: "I shall define comprehension--or the extraction of meaning from the text--as the reduction of uncertainty." (p. 185).

Obviously these definitions of reading comprehension, but representative of a host, raise more questions than they answer. Simons (1971) suggested that Thorndike's description of reading comprehension reported in 1917

> ...still almost exhausts the accumulated knowledge of this fundamental intellectual process. The workings of the mind during reading comprehension remain a great and profound mystery (p. 340).

In 1976 Miller, in his role as chairperson of a panel of the National Institute of Education Conference on Studies in Reading (U.S.), stated:

> Work on text comprehension is not yet far-advanced. There are major gaps in our understanding of the anatomy of the text comprehension process, and in our knowledge of the skills that make comprehension possible (pp. 709-10).

MISSING EMPHASES

Although Thorndike (1917), Yoakam (1955), as well as others have strongly suggested the interaction of the reader and the writer as vital factors in reading comprehension, the significant role played by the quality and quantity of pre-knowledge of the reader is not seriously considered. In my opinion--partially formulated with the help of the ideas of Kellogg Hunt and others--reading comprehension is the difference between what someone knew about a topic prior to the reading and what he or she "winds up with" or possesses following the reading. This information and/or idea gain is always modulated by the individual reader. Factors which influence information or idea gain are the nature of the learner, the nature of the material, the nature of the purposes for reading, and the means used for measurement,

Nature of the learner. Since the individual learner is a being different from all other beings, there is little doubt that reading comprehension will be affected by cultural background, specific background experiences, linguistic knowledge and flexibility, general knowledge, and attitudes. As has been said so often, the printed words mean nothing unless the reader brings meaning to them. It would appear that comprehension should be better for a given reader when background factors more closely match those represented in the graphic display. When you know about something in advance, the task--even with new information or ideas added--is less formidable and comprehension of the new is more certain. When language patterns of reader and writer are similar, the message has a far better chance of being understood. As Smith defines reading, it is the reduction of uncertainty. When the reader meets language very distant from his or her own--no matter how simple the information presented--reducing uncertainty becomes a great struggle.

Nature of the material. As already indicated, the distance between the reader and the writer is a vital factor in reading comprehension. When the written language patterns are far different from that of the reader, when the information being presented is largely unknown to the reader, and when the writer's attitudes diverge widely from those of the reader, comprehension becomes difficult. Hence, a given reader's comprehension may differ widely from week-to-week, day-to-day, moment-to-moment (Hittleman) dependent upon the nature of the content and the attitudes of the writer.

Purposes for reading. Although many of the theorists--labeled and otherwise--and some of the research focus on the importance of purposes in reading, relatively little attention has been paid to this aspect of reading comprehension. Readers do tend to adjust comprehension to their purposes. They appear to be at the greatest loss when they are asked to contend with amorphous purposes such as "Read pages 230-276 for tomorrow." Or, and this is in the form of conjecture, when they are asked to deal with external purposes having little real meaning for them: "Today you are going to take a standardized test to see how well you read."

Means used for measurement. In our quest to ascertain reading comprehension, we administer many types of quizzes or tests or examinations. Aside from needing to have more information about pre-knowledge of students--linguistic, experiential, attitudinal--we need to consider the nature of the measurement. We are not evaluating the same kind of understanding when we ask students to state main ideas at times, details at other times, and inferences at others. We are asking for different types of performances when we use multiple-choice, cloze, essay, sentence completion, paraphrase, summary, et cetera. Some students may "comprehend" better when faced with one type of test format than another. Some may do better with a given format dependent upon the nature of the material, the testing conditions, the expectations of the instructor.

Comprehension versus retention must also be considered. When an open-book test is administered, that is probably a test of comprehension as long as the instructor considers what the reader knew prior to reading. On the other hand, when a quiz is given an hour, a day, a week, a month, or a term apart from the reading, where does comprehension end and retention begin? Does an adequate comprehender become a poor reader?

IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTRUCTION

1. In all probability comprehension is an holistic process rather than a series of skills to be presented to each learner in a given sequence. Teachers need to ascertain the strengths and weaknesses of students as they engage in this thinking process with varied materials in different situations. Learning should be directed toward integration of ideas.

2. If comprehension can be thought of as the difference between what was known before the reading took place and what was learned during the reading--information gain, then we need to place some research activity on pragmatic means of measuring pre-knowledge. By pre-knowledge I mean not only information possessed by the reader about a topic(s), but also knowledge about the cultural background, the linguistic background, the mental capabilities, as well as the feelings and attitudes of given readers. In daily teaching activities, instructors should attempt to learn as much as possible about each student's bank of knowledge in general; however, specific pre-knowledge should be tapped prior to the reading of a particular subject. Such "tapping" will probably accomplish two ends: (1) improved reading performance, and (2) a clearer picture of actual comprehension of what was read.

3. In somewhat the same light, instructors should carefully consider the complexity of the material a student is to read as well as the "distance" between the reader and the writer. Material far from the pre-knowledge bank of a given reader should probably not be introduced at all; if such material must be introduced instructors should help students build some pre-knowledge prior to engaging in the reading activity. Reading without some pre-knowledge will result in extremely

limited or even zero comprehension.

4. In my opinion there is no such entity as "the reading process." Reading processes differ in relation to many factors, but particularly in regard to purpose. Instructors should assist their charges in developing suitable strategies for specific purposes. The more "purpose" one sets for the reading, the greater the likelihood of increased comprehension. No one should be asked to read pages 22-67 and be prepared to discuss those pages tomorrow. Purposes(s) should be set prior to reading; purposes will differ in terms of the nature of the learner, the nature of the material, the demands of the learner, the demands of the instructor, and the demands of the curriculum. Purposes may also be differentiated--across the same material--for individual learners.

Students who are helped to read with purpose--to satisfy varying needs--can also be easily guided to establish their own purposes at the onset of any reading. Such purpose-setting on the part of the learner is assurance of improved comprehension. Perhaps a reason why some students perform miserably on standardized tests and even on some classroom quizzes is the nature of the task--to please the teacher, to ascertain achievement, to test weaknesses. Such external, mechanical purposes do not make for active, really purposeful reading.

5. Instructors should consider what aspect(s) of the reading-thinking process they want to tap when tests and examinations are organized. Undoubtedly the multiple-choice test is making different demands on the reader than the essay question. Two factors need to be considered: (1) Which kind of questioning fits the nature of, and the purpose(s) of, the task best? (2) What type of thinking is the test focusing on? Why?

Teachers may want to place differing weights on the results of different kinds of evaluation. In all probability an essay question which calls for high-level thought and organization, for many situations, is a more complex task than filling in the blanks or regurgitating content through answering an host of short-answer questions.

In the instructional situation, outside of formal measurement procedures, instructors will want to examine their own use of questioning in day-to-day teaching. Although many types of questions are needed and will be utilized in a classroom, efforts should be made to create questions which will call for synthesis, integration, organization, evaluation, creative utilization. Teachers will also want to evaluate the abilities of specific youngsters to cope with differing types of questions. Structured guidance in moving from regurgitation to digestion can only increase the students' repertoire and aid reading comprehension.

6. Although an important goal of education is to have students remember what they comprehend, instructors should keep in mind that there is a difference between retention and comprehension. A spurious conclusion following a student's poor performance on a recall test could be that he or she doesn't understand what was read. The student may have understood and not remembered--in a variety of ratios.

Instructors need to be certain that students do comprehend material when it is before them--open book--before making judgments about comprehension based on recall. Some students are helped in their battle to retain by structured guidance in moving from simple open book tasks at which they succeed. Then, with further assistance, they may be ready to proceed to some of the tasks we have often taken for granted.

IN CONCLUSION

The task of the researcher who desires to come to grips with aspects of the complex concept called reading comprehension is bewildering and enormous. The task of the teacher is equally bewildering and enormous but also probably the most vital instructional job within the class setting. We all have much to learn. Perhaps some of the tentative implications for instruction will be useful as instructional frameworks.

Comprehension is, indeed, an elusive concept!

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